RECONCILIATION
II Corinthians 5:17 - 6:2
MAY 13, 1973

(4) in a sense this cong. has been thinking about Mother's Day - Parents' d since Jan 1 .. programmatically + sermonically - and so this will not be a typical M.D. sermon

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~~This is Mother's Day, and~~ I am very much aware that a lot of people come to church on this day expecting to hear a Mother's Day sermon. (D) ~~But~~ For me ~~it~~ this is another occasion: it is the last time I will be preaching a full sermon from this pulpit until August 26. I will be here next Sunday for Communion - but in terms of the traditional job of preaching, this is it for three months. It's a strange feeling: one that I've never experienced before. In preparing to go to Scotland and preach to a congregation I don't know, and to whom I will be committed for a relatively brief period of time, a congregation with a different tradition, a different style and concept of Church life than this one, I have learned a little bit about the act of preaching itself. I have learned, for instance, that after spending six and one half years with a congregation, sermon content is very heavily influenced by the shared life, the concerns, problems and priorities of that congregation: and that it is one thing to prepare a sermon for this congregation - and anothering thing altogether to think about preaching to an anonymous group of people.

In any case, as I thought about this day, I found myself under the kind of pressure that usually happens only at Easter and Christmas: i.e. the significance of the day outstrips the minister's ability to deal with it: and there is more to be said than either time or skill will allow. And as I thought about what I wanted to say at the last opportunity I'd have to say much of anything for three months, I kept returning to ~~that~~ the central theological theme of the Gospel in our age - namely - Reconciliation.

Thus I invite you to think with me about what has emerged in our time as a critical Biblical motif - and the guiding theological concept for the modern church. The key passage is II Corinthians 5 - which I read this morning.

Webster defines Reconcilication: "to cause to be friendly again: to bring back to harmony." The root of the Greek word which Paul used in his letter to the Corinthians means: "a new stage in personal relationships in which previous hostility of mind or estrangement has been put away in some decisive act." (Theological Wordbook of the Bible) In Paul's mind a man in Christ was an entirely new person, living in the context of brand new relationships with God, self and other men. The old order is gone: something fresh and new and creative is now possible. Reconciliation for Paul, was the closing of the gap

between men and God: and it was something already done. Reconciliation is God's work: accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul describes it as something which has already happened: men need only accept the new status God has provided: men only have to "be reconciled". But it was more than a personal sense of salvation for Paul. Rather, reconciliation becomes an experienced reality in the new community of faith made up of reconciled invididuals - namely the church. And at this point the emphasis alters dramatically. The reconciled community becomes a reconciling community: a group with a task to do and a job description. God, Paul asserted, has made us agents or ambassadors of reconciliation in the world.

The importance of that is defined by the fact that the theology of reconciliation runs through the Confession of 1967, the most recent theological statement of the United Presbyterian Church, and that the mission of the church has been redefined in terms of reconciliation. Beyond that it is important because it is exactly the opposite of what a lot of people seem to believe about the Gospel. To be a Christian means to be good for a lot of folks. But Paul held that God doesn't count our offenses: he forgives and accepts prior to anything we do. For a lot of people there is a great chasm between self and God: and the only way to bridge the gap is to feel guilty about one's sins, obey the religious rules of the Church and keep trying to be an acceptable person in God's sight. But Paul asserted that it's already been accomplished. Everything that needs to be done for reconciliation to become a reality has already happened. ("God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.") All that is required of men is to accept what God has done: to be it, live it, share it, celebrate it, and carry it out into the world.

~~And at~~ the heart of it ~~is~~ is the assumption that God's gift of reconciliation meets man at the point of his deepest need. To be reconciled assumes that something was broken separated, alienated; apart, divided. ~~And it is no mere coincidence that we live in what has been called the age of~~ estrangement and alienation. ~~Let's think about estrangement and reconciliation in terms of ourselves, our families and marriages and then in the context of our particular society.~~

Personal ~~estrangement~~ is a much used phrase and it means, essentially, that most of us don't like who we are: we are alienated from ourselves: we pretend to be something we

are not: or we knock ourselves out trying to win the acceptance of other people which, we hope, will compensate for the fact that we have trouble accepting ourselves. J. Martin Baily suggests that most of us - as children - were either "bullies or sissies", that we found it difficult to accept others as peers, or to accept peer status for ourselves. As children and adolescents we were driven by an obsession to prove ourselves, academically, athletically, socially. And as adults we are still doing it: getting ulcers or setting the stage for an early heart attack by working 18 hours a day everyday, not because we really have to - but because psychologically, spiritually, we need to. We need to prove our acceptability. And if the job simply won't sustain that need we fill it with excessive busyness, wearing ourselves out for the P.T.A., Scouts, Service Club, or whatever we can find that will tell us we are acceptable, needed and wanted.

The culture of youth coined a phrase not long ago that pin points our dilemna: "Getting it together" It serves, I believe, as an adequate synonym for the Gospel of Reconciliation. Because God has made us his friends, we may be friends with ourselves. Because God accepts us as we are, we are free to accept ourselves. We don't have to be someone else: we don't have to attack each day like the 500' drivers, risking life, and sanity in order to break yesterday's record. The Gospel of reconciliation opens a door to a new world in which it is O.K. to be who we are.

And from there we are in a position to think about family and marriage. There is no doubt about it that we are in the middle of a domestic revolution on this front, and where it will finally end no one knows. The nuclear family is bending and breaking under the tensions of the 1970's. Parents and children are on opposite sides of a gap - which in terms of time can be located at the point of the Second World War - and which has given each of them an entirely different history, expectation level and value system. That is so normative for us that it hardly needs to be documented. Two illustrations will suffice. I have a moral hang-up about discarding clothes: I wear a pair of pants and a pair of loafers to work in the yard that are barely respectable. My children are inclined to not wear certain shoes because the color is wrong. There's a gap there: I'm on the side that learned that shoes are expensive - and that everyone has two pairs: one for dress-up; the other for play: and that when the dress-up shoes are beyond repair they become play

shoes. The children are of another school altogether. Or think about sexuality and moral values. My children can see more erotic material by looking at the newspaper movie ads - or glancing at the magazine rack at "Night Owl" or "Payless" than I ever knew existed until I was 18.

There are a lot of other gaps, and I believe that Margaret Mead was correct when she suggested that anyone born before 1941 is now an immigrant in a new land the Natives of which are our children. There is bitterness and defensiveness on both sides of that gap. The Beatles were speaking for a lot of young people when they sang in 1967:

"She's leaving home
After living alone
for so many years."

And Edgar Friedenberg, a sociologist, has observed that: "Children are not fighting their parents any more. They're abandoning [illegible]"

Reconciliation between God and man begins with God's initiative in Jesus Christ, and is fulfilled by man's response. So in the context of the family the estrangement between parents and children that has become so destructive in our time will be overcome by people of intelligence and grace and love. Someone has to take the initiative: instead of retreating to both sides of the gap someone has to have the courage to come across. Instead of waiting for children to say, ("I'm sorry - I'm wrong, rebellious, and immature" someone has to have the grace to say ("it's OK to be you: and even though we are different - I love you and accept you for what you are.")

Marriage? Someone has suggested that the best thing a man can do for his children is to love their mother. The reverse is equally true. And yet the venerable institution of marriage is in deep trouble today. It was a long time coming - but women all over the country are discovering that they are persons: that parenting is a shared task: that maintaining a home is a responsibility that belongs to two people not one. And all too often the male response has been chauvinistic on the surface; but beneath the surface one of terrible fear. And so we're dealing with new tensions: new demands: new estrangment.

John Ciardi, writing in Saturday Review ~~said it all~~: illustrated ..

"I love you", she said

"I adore you," he said

"I love you more," she said

"More than what," he said

"Than you love me," she said.

"Impossible," he said

"Don't argue," she said.

"I was only....," he said.

"Shut up," she said.

Marriage? I'm convinced that someone has to learn the Biblical concept of reconciliation. Agressive love that accepts and forgives without being asked. Love that affirms the dignity and particularity of the other: love that sees marriage in terms of a deep and intimate mutuality - not an arrangement of convenience from which each partner gets what he wants.

And finally society. In no other arena is the idea of estrangement and alienation so dramatically real than between the individual and society. Again, that has become a kind of overworked cliche for us. But it was dramatized for me by the words of Albert Outler, professor at Perkins School of Theology. There was no one in his entire circle of acquaintances, Outler maintained, who did not feel discriminated against, put upon and thus alienated from society. Think about that for a minute.

Racial minorities feel discrimminated against by the white majority. While the white majority feels put upon by the demands of the minority. Both the elderly and the young are caught up in causes demanding rights, care and attention. Women feel oppressed by men: men feel threatened by women. The working man feels that big businessmen hold all the chips. Big business is sure the scales are weighted in favor of labor. Everyone feels shut out by someone else. No matter who you are, you belong to a group that today is frustrated, angry, defensive and militant. Outler concludes that the nation is in a "sour mood". And Watergate, Vescoe and the Ellsberg trial haven't helped much.

What do we have to offer in that overheated atmosphere? What do we have that will sustain us and support us as we attempt to make some semblence of sense out of our lives?

The answer I believe is Reconciliation. God's good gift of reconciliation that he has given in Jesus Christ. And it begins between us and our God: it is, primarily, but not exclusively - a personal thing; it makes no sense to rush out into the world trying to reconcile until you know personally what it means and feels like to be reconciled.

It begins with us, I believe, as we hear the words: it begins when the idea of reconciliation is implanted in the mind: when, intellectually we slowly begin to be comfortable with the concept that in Jesus Christ God has made us his friends', that we are acceptable to and loved by God. That's the function of preaching - to proclaim good news - to tell the Gospel.

But it's still cereberal: reconciliation is still an intellectual thesis until it is experienced and that brings in the church. For it is here - and only here - that people gather to celebrate together their common reconciliation in Christ. It is here that what is given to us personally is passed around and shared - liturgically in the Sacraments - but ordinarily in the common concern and support we offer to each other.

And then - once we know ourselves to be reconciled, once we grow into an understanding of our church as a reconciled community - are we in a position to become a reconciling community in the world: then we become ambassadors of reconciliation. It isn't optional: it's not an honors course for super Christians. It is simply the way it is with people who know who they are.

Saul Alinsky, a community organizer was once speaking to a group of clergymen and said: " You've got to get away from this reconciliation jazz... Reconciliation means only one thing: when one side gets enough power then the other side gets reconciled to it." And it is the saddest commentary I can think of that in a nation that calls itself Christian Alinsky is right. Racial reconciliation of sorts happened only after Blacks got some power. Universities and students get reconciled when the students burn down the Math building. The government takes the Indians seriously when a town is siezed, several people killed and a million dollars in damage done.

The job of the church - the job which needs doing today - is to present an alternative to reconciliation on the basis of threat. It means always resisting the arrogance of an Alinsky; the self-righteousness that may produce temporary results but which further

alienates in the process. The job of the Church, corporately, in our culture is to move out - to listen, to support, to heal and bind up wounds - to move into the stickiest areas of political, economic and social division and bring people back in touch with each other. It's not easy to do; the man in the middle often gets hurt - but I believe, deeply, that it is what we are called to do: and that it is all we have to offer. The Gospel of Reconciliation.

The promise of God is a new creation: a new being: a whole new world for those who would accept their reconciliation and then dare to become agents of reconciliation. That's the promise - and as I leave for three months I know of nothing that I would rather hold up before you. It begins here - between God and you: it is experienced here between you and your fellow Christian: and it is carried from here and practiced between you and your neighbor, your spouse, your children, your nation.

In Jesus Christ God extended himself across the gap between men and himself: between us and him.

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself: and he has made us ambassadors of reconcilication. If a man is in Christ he is a new person altogether.

That is the Gospel. AMEN

Father, just as we are incomplete apart from from you, so the world needs to know you and your love. Grant us here to experience our reconciliation. And give us courage to become your reconciling people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN